

REVIEW OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: ISSUES AND PROSPECTS

Information Technology in Languages for Specific Purposes: Issues and Prospects

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(Editors)

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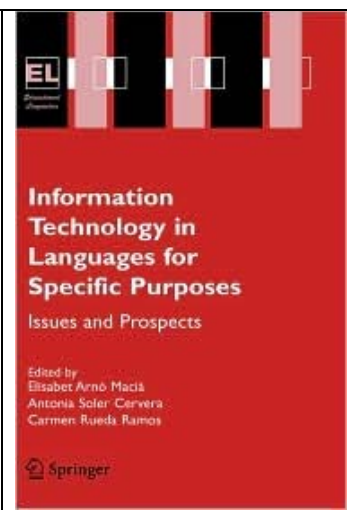
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Information Technology in Languages for Specific Purposes: Issues and Prospects is based on papers presented at the 6th International Conference on Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) held in January 2003 in Barcelona, Spain. It is intended for LSP teachers, researchers, and applied linguists. The purpose of the volume is “to offer an overview of an ample variety of applications of IT in the field of LSP” (p. 5). The individual chapters fall within the framework of a socio-cognitive approach to language learning, drawing “attention to language form in the context of authentic language use *for specific purposes*” (p. xiv, emphasis in original). The book contains 15 chapters which include a foreword, an introduction, five thematic parts, conclusion, and a subject index.

In the Foreword, Mark Warschauer sets the tone for the rest of the book by stating that information and communication technologies have transformed both the “*context* of language learning” and “*how* people learn languages” (p. xiii–xiv).

The Introduction contains only one chapter entitled “The Role of Information Technology in Languages for Specific Purposes: Some Central Issues” by Arnó, Soler, and Rueda. They define LSP or ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in terms of a comprehensive framework proposed by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), within which IT is approached from two different perspectives. Thus, the book covers two main strands that determine its organization. One strand deals with pedagogy, namely the latest trends in CALL applications, while the other strand is concerned with research in the use of technology in LSP.

Part 1, entitled “Corpus-based Studies,” contains three chapters. In “Corpus Linguistics and English for Academic Purposes,” Swales introduces the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) and explains the relative usefulness of specialized as compared to general corpora. He describes his own experience with a corpus-linguistic and concordancing approaches to studying academic speech and provides examples of pedagogical applications of corpus linguistics to the teaching of LSP.

In “Interaction in Academic Spoken English: The Use of ‘I’ and ‘You’ in the MICASE,” Fortanet Gómez reports on a study to establish the frequency, referents, and discourse functions of the pronouns “I” and “you.” Using MICASE for quantitative research and a sub-corpus of five lectures for qualitative research,

she found that interaction in lectures was associated with a higher frequency of the use of “I,” whereas monologic language in the MICASE showed a tendency towards more frequent use of “you.” Her research highlights the usefulness of MICASE as a specialized corpus.

In “Exploring Epistemic Modality in Academic Discourse Using Corpora,” Rizomilioti examines epistemic modality (i.e., “the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed,” p. 55), in three small corpora from articles in biology, literary criticism, and archaeology journals, aiming to find similarities and differences across disciplines in terms of the expression of both reduced and emphasized certainty. Overall, the researcher found a high degree of uncertainty in archaeology articles, whereas certain claims were made with certainty in biology. The highest levels of certainty were observed in literary criticism. While showing the need for further investigation, this study produces evidence-derived pedagogical materials for teaching academic writing in the three fields.

Part 2, “Computer-Mediated Communication,” includes three chapters. Apple and Gilabert Guerrero report on a collaborative tandem e-mail project between LSP students in Dublin and Barcelona in their article “Finding Common Ground in LSP: A Computer-Mediated Communication Project.” They investigated two tandem groups who wrote to each other – one with and one without assigned tasks. The results showed that in task-assigned learning, LSP learners “produc[ed] more language, more regularly and in a sustained way” (p. 85), suggesting that task-based learning is a flexible framework for implementing tasks and catering to learners’ specific needs in computer-mediated communication contexts.

In “Uncovering Tasks and Texts – Teaching ESP Through Online Workshops,” Hussin describes two interactive online workshops: one to develop cross-cultural communication skills of ESL nursing students, and the other to teach ESL business students to write a research conference paper and avoid plagiarism. Hussin discusses the positive features and challenges of each workshop. She concludes that online workshops are effective in helping students develop and manage their communication skills and academic writing.

In “The SMAIL Project: A Dialogic Approach to Computer-Assisted Language Learning for the LSP Classroom,” Caballero Rodríguez and Ruiz Madrid report on developing a multimedia learning environment, called SMAIL, to promote autonomous language learning. SMAIL was implemented in accordance with the European Portfolio for Languages following the guidelines proposed by the European Council. The system includes a learning styles questionnaire and a proficiency test in the foreign language (French, Spanish, German, and English) to build a learner profile. The materials are organized according to different genres, such as instruction leaflets, car ads, and argumentative texts. Additionally, “journey metaphors” (i.e., discovering a language through a journey in which the learner enters or discovers a new culture through its language) act as a blueprint for presenting learning activities while taking into account learner diversity and autonomy. The authors describe a case study of how learners interact with SMAIL and choose activities based on their personal interests.

Part 3 is titled “Specific Technology-Based Projects in Different Educational Settings”. It contains two chapters. In “Technology for Trust, Collaboration, and Autonomy among Asian Students at the University Level,” Devaux, Otterbach, and Cheng who represent three institutions (China, the United States, and Taiwan) describe a collaborative technology-based project to help LSP students from Taiwan and China to transition from an educational approach that stresses the accumulation of information and memorization to a more active one. By situating their project in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), the authors created a scaffolding environment within which they helped students build trust, move from isolation to collaboration, and develop autonomous learning. The authors reported a substantial improvement in writing academic papers, working as a team, building a community, communicating and collaborating, and conducting original research.

In “Networking for Learning and Teaching English for Specific Purposes,” Healey describes a three-year

project in which specialists from Oregon conducted workshops aimed at improving skills in e-mail and Internet use in an EFL/ESP environment in Tunisia where the use of technology and the Internet is scarce. The project ended in collaboration both among faculty members of different departments and between the participating institutions.

Part 4, titled “Technology and Learner Autonomy in Higher Education,” contains three chapters. In “Learning English with Computers at the University Level,” Lasagabaster and Sierra used a questionnaire to investigate the impressions of 59 undergraduate students about their learning experiences in a university multimedia laboratory in a self-access center in the Basque Autonomous Community. Based on the results, they suggest that the teachers could analyze the software programs used in the courses and consider the students’ reactions “to refine the pedagogical quality of these materials and their usage to better meet LSP students’ needs” (p. 171).

In “Using the Internet to Promote Autonomous Learning in ESP,” Luzón Marco and González Pueyo explore the use of the Internet for ESP teaching as well as ways in which teachers can exploit Internet-based materials to design activities to promote autonomous learning by ESP learners. They present a sample Internet-based activity (<http://webquest.sdsu.edu/>) in which a group of students is presented with an authentic situation along with a specific task such as solving a problem, or making a decision. The authors conclude that such activities provide scaffolding and increase motivation, integration, learner-centeredness, and strategy use. They caution, however, that the use of technology does not *per se* guarantee autonomy building, unless teachers take into account the students’ language level and the relevance of the activities to the students’ goals, as well as provide guidance, feedback, and support.

In “Integration of E-learning into a Tertiary Educational Context,” Trinder describes the integration of an e-learning component into face-to-face Business English classes in Austria. She discusses considerations in designing web-delivered courses (Chapelle, 2001) such as learner fit, language learning potential, and focus on meaning and presents students’ perceptions concerning the effectiveness of the classes. As Trinder argues, integrating an e-learning component into a program “involves a predisposition of the learner to exploiting it to its best advantage” (p. 205). This predisposition depends on learner internal factors, such as needs and learning styles, interacting with contextual factors (e.g., endorsement by teachers and peers), and courseware intrinsic factors (e.g. motivation).

Part five, “Terminology and Lexis: Teaching and Translation,” includes two chapters. Piqué-Angordans, Posteguillo, and Melcion in “The Development of a Computer Science Dictionary, or How to Help Translate the Untranslatable” report on a collaborative effort by researchers at two Spanish and one British university to develop a bilingual dictionary of computing (English-Spanish/Spanish-English). The dictionary is based on a corpus of 1,125,768 words, consisting of sub-corpora of different texts and glossaries, and consists of words selected for relevance, clarity, and economy. Entries include head word, part of speech, quotations, and technical commentary.

In “The Importance of Key Words for LSP,” Scott considers the application of the notion of “keyness” to LSP. Keyness “presupposes an interest in text and textuality” (p. 232). There are two main underlying aspects of “keyness”: namely, importance and aboutness, or what a communicative event is about. Scott argues that certain procedures might be used to identify the items with “great aboutness” as opposed to those with “no aboutness” and then to consider what the relationships may be between such keywords and other items in the middle of such a continuum (p. 234). He then suggests using technological tools to help students identify the main point(s) of a text. He also discusses different levels and types of context and gives a useful example for detecting “keyness” using *WordSmith Tools* (Scott, 1999). In the remainder of the chapter Scott looks at keywords from a pedagogical perspective, concluding that they “can provide a further way of raising language awareness” (p. 241).

In “Conclusions,” Arnó, Soler, and Rueda discuss the individual chapters from the perspectives of specialized language, online communication, CALL in LSP, distance education, and learner autonomy.

They believe that “it is no longer a matter of how to incorporate technology, but rather how to adapt LSP practice to a context of constant technological changes” (p. 257). The editors list key factors in the process of adaptation to the changes brought about by IT. Among them are the need to adapt LSP practice to technological changes; the need for LSP teachers to catch up with their students’ technological skills; technological innovation and collaboration among LSP practitioners; and external factors that impact the adoption of technology by LSP practitioners

Readers of *Information Technology in Languages for Specific Purposes: Issues and Prospects* will benefit from the variety of perspectives on the use of technologies in LSP teaching, learning, and research. However, much more work remains to be done. For instance, future practitioners and researchers could focus on the application of IT to listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, as well as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

One limitation of the book is that it is limited to papers presented at the 6th International Conference on Languages for Specific Purposes. As a result, some important areas of LSP are not included. For instance, the volume could have benefitted from the inclusion of a chapter on the use of IT in LSP assessment. A chapter dealing with the limitations of technology in teaching LSP would have provided a needed balance between the positive and negative effects of technology in teaching LSP.

To conclude, *Information Technology in Languages for Specific Purposes: Issues and Prospects* is an informative, well written, and timely contribution to the field of second language learning. Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings, the volume is a helpful reference for LSP practitioners and researchers.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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